

DOE site tours nostalgic for many

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Eugene Waggoner, shown in the C-300 Central Control Building at the Paducah Gaseous Diffusion Plant, is one of several former plant employees who have recently taken part in public tours of the facility.

Eugene Waggoner was 29 when the first equipment began enriching uranium at the Paducah Gaseous Diffusion Plant.

Numerous officials from the Atomic Energy Commission, the predecessor agency to the Department of Energy, and then-plant-operator Union Carbide had gathered at the C-333 process building as the first valve was opened to introduce uranium hexafluoride into the enrichment equipment at what was known as Unit 1.

"We were not sure if it would even operate," said Waggoner, now 93. "It was sort of exciting to get that building going."

Waggoner returned to the Paducah site this year for the first time in 34 years when he participated in a public tour coordinated by the DOE's cleanup and deactivation contractor, Fluor Federal Services. DOE is offering the tours to inform the public about the site's new mission, history and current activities. More than 500 people have signed up for this year's tours, which are now filled. More tours are planned next summer.

"The response to the tour program has been overwhelmingly positive, especially from former employees like Mr. Waggoner," said DOE Paducah Site Lead Jennifer Woodard. "This program is an excellent opportunity for the community to see firsthand the site and understand the progress we are making in the cleanup of the site."

Waggoner retired from the Paducah plant in 1982 after a 30-year career, just as the plant was completing a multimillion-dollar upgrade.

"When you work (at the plant) for 30 years, certain things on a tour like that just brought so many things to mind," Waggoner said. "I had no comprehension whatsoever of what it looked like now with the action going on in the cleanup operation."

Waggoner began his professional life as a teacher after serving in the U.S. Navy in World War II and completing a degree in agriculture.

"We had our lives all set for being teachers," he said. After four years of teaching vocational agriculture, Waggoner was making \$1.60 an hour -- less than the \$1.80 an hour offered at the plant.

"My plans for my life were teaching," Waggoner said, "but when they started building this plant out here, money does talk, you know?"

Waggoner drove 45 miles from his home in Fulton County to downtown Paducah to interview for a job at the plant. After speaking with the interviewer, Waggoner returned to his car and told his wife, "They've offered me a job already." When she asked him what the job offer was, he said, "Cascade operator ... I have no idea what that is."

The secrecy surrounding the gaseous diffusion process at that time meant Waggoner would not know the duties of his job until he had accepted the position, received security clearance and spent three months in training.

Waggoner accepted the position and was assigned to the C-333 process building where he worked four years monitoring and maintaining the equipment used in the enrichment process until his promotion to project engineering.

"I was amazed at how well the divisions and departments worked together," he said. After 10 years in project engineering, Waggoner took the professional engineer state board test and passed. "I bet I was the only professional engineer in the state of Kentucky with a degree in agriculture," he said.

In 1970, the Atomic Energy Commission issued a mandate requiring the plant have a full-time quality assurance manager. "At that time, before they had a QA program, each department was responsible for its own quality control," Waggoner said.

He applied for the position and, after receiving training at Oak Ridge, he became Paducah's first QA manager, as well as the first QA manager in any of the three gaseous diffusion plants across the country.

"I wound up having to do a lot of lectures to the other sites to bring them up to par," he said.

As the plant's QA manager, Waggoner's task was to audit the manufacturers of the critical components to ensure their QA programs met the requirements of the plant and DOE for the upgrade program.

"We audited compressors, barriers, motors, wiring, cylinders, everything that was involved in the (upgrade) program," he said. Waggoner led QA at Paducah until his retirement. Moving forward, the lessons learned from the plant upgrade program, on which Waggoner worked, could be important resources when making crucial decisions on decontamination and decommissioning.

Returning to the plant during the first public tour, Waggoner reflected on the scale of what was accomplished during his tenure.

"The feeling that existed at that plant existed in the country at that time. The country was united at that time, a common purpose. I think that feeling carried out through my years," Waggoner said.

Waggoner said the tour was "really enlightening to me. I just had no idea about the enormity of what is going on and what DOE is still facing."